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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the rationale and teaching methods for a six-week unit, for a high school freshman English Class, on perception, semantics, and writing, which places special focus on developing tension in student writing. The first four objectives of the course focus on perception and the next two focus on semantics. The seventh objective--developing a point of view in an extended definition--is the first writing assignment. The eight objective concerns the revision of the definition paper; the ninth objective asks the student to write a personal narrative that shifts in point in view and evokes within the reader a sense of tension, and the tenth objective requires the student to pass a proficiency test on punctuation. The major portion of the paper discusses the personal narrative assignment, includes a description of preliminary teaching activities designed to motivate the students for writing, and discusses the results of the assignment. A number of the student narratives and a bibliography are included. (DI)

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Paper Given at the NCTE Convention, Minneapolis 1972

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CREATING TENSION IN WRITING

by Bernarr Folta
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When talking about what makes good prose style, Robert Frost once said, "Everything written is as good as it is dramatic...A dramatic necessity goes deep into the nature of the sentence. Sentences are not different enough to hold the attention unless they are dramatic."[1]

In this paper I plan to focus on creating "tension" in writing, a dramatic or dynamic quality that is generated by two forces pulling in opposite directions. But first I will describe several activities that can be used to prepare the student for the kind of writing I am talking about. Below is a list of objectives I used in a six week unit with my high school freshmen students. The first four objectives focus on perception and

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Add list of objectives here. Page 1 of handout.

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the next two focus on semantics. The seventh objective is the first writing assignment: developing a point of view in an extended definition. But the objective I want to focus on in this paper is Objective 9: Writing a personal narrative that shifts in voice and point of view, and evokes within the reader a sense of tension.

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Handout #1

CREATING TENSION IN WRITING

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The following are major student objectives for a unit on perception, semantics and writing.

1. Distinguish between advertisements in magazines using a highly emotional appeal and those using an appeal to reason.

2. Classify ads in terms of type of appeal.

3. Explain values represented in visual symbols.

4. Explain how background and emotions can influence visual response in a positive way or in a negative way.

5. Study student responses to given words and formulate possible reasons as to the causes of certain responses.

6. Know the meanings of connotation, denotation, abstract and concrete words, loaded words.

7. Write an extended definition, with the dominant impression being that the writer has carefully considered how different people may attach different or similar meanings to a given word.

8. Demonstrate the use of revision skills such as elimination, sentence-combining, addition, and substitution when revising the first draft of the extended difinition paper.

9. Write a personal narrative that shifts in voice and point of view, and evokes within the reader a sense of tension.

10. Pass a proficiency test on punctuation.

Text: Discovering Motives in Writing
Harcourt Brece & Jovanovich, Inc. (1972)

In designing a sequence of activities that moved from the study of perception, to the study of semantics, to the study of point of view and voice, I wanted to follow through with Vygotsky's notion that "a true and full understanding of another's thought is possible only when we understand its affective-volitional basis."[2] Another way of putting it is to say that before I can expect my kids to transfer some aspect of the world within themselves to another person through writing, I have to get them to search for meanings of the language constructs within themselves, to be sensitive to language responses of others, and to question their own motives for writing. It is only then that the writer can create an experience for the reader and say to himself with conviction: "This comes close to telling the truth."

In the classroom we used many visuals to talk about various perceptual and semantic responses. We discussed values that we associated with visual symbols. We explored each other's reactions and asked Why? (I took to class one picture of a man's face mounted on a carboard backing; one of his eyes was a strangely enlarged blue eye which I had taken from another picture. A caption for this visual read: "You ask me why I see things so differently?" Throughout the week and a half we worked on perception and semantics, we occasionally went back to the picture of Old Blue Eye and talked about the meaning behind the caption. A little weird. But kids in high school seemed to like it. And it got them to think about not only the stimuli-response but also about the psychology of motives in communication.)

Once the students demonstrated they understood a little more about how they saw things around them and how they consciously or unconsciously attached certain values to visual and verbal events, I felt they were ready to write. Within a six week period, I gave the students two writing assignments. The first dealt with writing an extended definition of an abstract word. The second assignment was a personal narrative designed to evoke a sense of tension within the reader. Of primary importance in both assignments was the writer's invention of a voice that honestly conveyed a willingness to communicate. If the writing voice failed to convince the reader of the writer's commitment to the subject, I might find myself saying to the student what Peter Elbow has told some of his students: "...I can't feel any person in these words....I can't hear <u>you</u>. "[3]

The two writing assignments I gave my students can be considered as two basic methods in composing. The extended definition gains its unity through many small units that develop one dominant impression. The writing based on tension gains its unity through the juxtaposition of seemingly discordant units. For the most part, the concept of dominance in shaping the first writing assignment is easily understood, but I would like to share with you a paper I received from one of my freshmen. (I am adding this paper only because I respect the author's craft and because I feel I owe her a chance to be heard.)

Loneliness

I have experienced loneliness in many different ways. I remember coming home from school as a child and searching all over the house for my mother to tell her the events of the day. My search was occasionally unsuccessful, and I would feel lost and uneasy. Too late would I discover the note explaining that she had run to the store for a few items.

Often I feel lonely for a reason I cannot explain and other people cannot understand. I pass a field in the cool evening hours and breathe deeply, smelling the wild, pungent aroma of weeds and daisies. The smell is so wild and free and melancholy. Its intenseness disturbs me. It seems as if the land is reaching up to grab me, crying out, begging me to feel its misery. A deep, unexplainable sadness fills me and I run away from the field seeking warmth and people.

by Lynn Stone
Grade 9

By its nature, the extended definition is symetrical. Everything in the writing pyramids to a point--the feeling the writer wants you to experience. For the most part, getting kids to use this method of ordering is relatively easy. Getting the students to use the second method of ordering is a little more complex. Below is the handout I used to initiate an assignment based on the second method of ordering.

Insert handout explaining the assignment (p. 2)

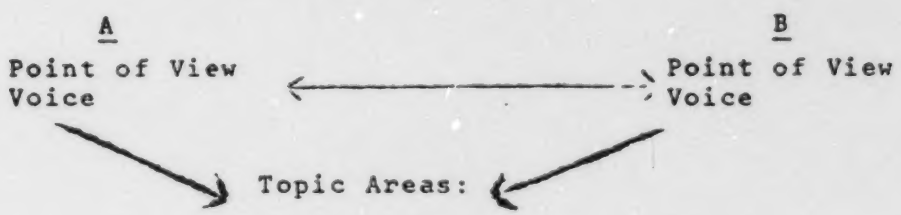
Handout #2

WRITING A PERSONAL NARRATIVE BASED ON TENSION

One of the main objectives of this assignment is to create an impact through personal narration--an impact that allows the reader to feel the writer's one unique perception about a given experience. The uniqueness will be conveyed through a contrast in both point of view and voice in writing.

The first one-third of the writing will focus on a point of view that is different from yours: the point of view of an outsider, the point of view of someone who is more distant from the event(s) that you had experienced, the point of view which represents a different angle of vision.

The voice from this point of view will be different from the voice that conveys your point of view. If your voice is highly emotive, the first voice will be very objective. If your voice expresses a feeling of urgency or bitterness, the first voice will be blase or perhaps even sentimental. There should be a sharp contrast of voices as well as a contrast in points of view.



Topic Areas:

Worship

The street where you live

Searching for ways to relate to people

An Olympic event

Training

For the student to work with this method of composing, he first had to select a topic to which he felt a strong commitment; he had to formulate a generalization which helpedhim to realize that commitment; he had to put that generalization into words; and then he had to realize that his verbalization of the commitment was only one way of looking at his subject: his point of view and his natural voice was to be treated as one unit in the composition; the second unit was to express another point of view and another voice. The juxtaposition of both points of view and both voices was a unit of meaning in itself that generated a dramatic transfer of feelings and ideas. This juxtaposition was to create a line of tension that helped the reader to come close to experiencing what the writer had experienced.

I knew that if I wanted my students to have success with this assignment, I would have to use several different ways of explaining what I meant by "tension." I wanted them to see, hear, and analyze different expressions of tensions before they tried creating it in their own writing. Here's what I did:

1. I drew on the chalkboard a circle, a rectangle, and a triangle on an inclined plane. I asked the students to identify the one shape that suggested the least amount of tension and then the one that suggested the most tension. We discussed the reasons for the various choices.
2. I showed the class a series of five pictures dry-mounted on one large piece of posterboard. The pictures accented various geometric shapes. I asked the students to identify the pictures which suggested the least amount of tension and those that suggested the most. We discussed why people

saw tension in some of the pictures and not in others; it was an interesting exchange on differences in perception.

3. I taped three selections of music: two of the selections were based on a theory of dominance; the other was based on discordance. (Chopin - Bach - Santana) I asked the students to identify the one based on discordance. This was quite wasy for them, but the important thing was that it reinforced the concept of tension.
4. I showed the students a series of slides. Each picture could represent a value of its own; but when two contrasting slides were shown, a third meaning based on the relationship of the two slides can be discovered. We didn't spend a lot of time analyzing the meanings: the aesthetic experience based on the tension is all that we wanted here.
5. We read Stan Both's poem "War" and a selection from Dick Gregory's "Nigger" and discussed the tension that we found in both works.
6. We examined several poems to shapren our senses for identifying both the speaking voice and the point of view.

Then the students were ready to consider the designs for their own writing topics. We went back to the handout and discussed it briefly. The next step was to try putting into speech the contrasting points of view and shifts in voices they wanted to control in their own writing. Then the students helped me to formulate a criteria for evaluating their papers, and they weighted each criterion for each of the drafts. I had them complete two drafts.

Why did I have them do at least two drafts? Simply because I wanted to evaluate the students on the best they could do. And I figured my comments would help them only if they were read, weighed, and accepted or rejected before the final draft was written.

Before the students submitted their final drafts, I gave them an opportunity to test our their writingswith a small group. The peer response told some of the writers they did an excellent job; it told others they needed to work a little more on their writing. Those that needed more time took it.

Below are samples of writing from my two classes.

Insert writings by Jenny Patchen
Karen Moskowitz or
Karen Hull

By using these papers, I don't mean to imply that they are perfect. More can be done with each paper. However, what I like about each composition is this: I feel an "aliveness" on the part of the writer. Each writer convinces me that she thought through a response that she wanted to evoke within the reader.

What percentage of my freshman studentswere highly successful with this writing assignment? Forty-three students out of forty-five were highly successful. I am still working with the other two students; both have expressed a determination to crawl inside the assignment and to try it again.

I am sure there are variations in which the theory of dominance and the theory of tension can be worked with in teaching students composition. For example, in teaching the extended definition, the students might focus on developing their own points of view, but they can also go outside of themselves by searching for different meanings the words might have for others. The contrast of points of view allows for a simple kind of tension.

In teaching students how to organize a research paper, I might have the students write the paper in two parts: the first part being a report on the subject; the second part might read more like an argument. Again, this is a simple but effective way of combining the concepts of tension and dominance.

And sometimes, perhaps, if you should ever give the student an opportunity to write about a line of tension within self, you might find some expression as rare as this:

This is Me

by Helen Lauer

> Tommy's very intelligent and good-looking. Mom likes him best--more than my sister or me. I look a lot like him--I'm glad of that. He's older than me. That's why I never got to know him at all. You see, he left home for good just before the folks got a divorce. So I never saw him, really. I haven't seen him for nine years, except for last summer. But before that, I'd always start to cry and feel really bad if I thought about him much.
>
> Everybody who knew him really likes him. He's been in New Orleans for years. A cardshark. Really--a professional cardplayer. That's how he makes his living. I think that's a riot. I mean, the guy's got an IQ of 170, and he plays cards all his life. I like him a lot. Hardly knew the guy, but I've always like him a lot. It makes me cry.

What bothers me is that I've always thought that Tommy's getting his legs cut off was an accident. It really stank when I found that my mother never told me the truth. She never tells me the truth about anything anyway, but this time it wasn't fair. 'a know? I mean I guess I can't really blame her. I mean, considering how messed up everything in our family is, I can see how she might not want to really talk about it. But she <u>lied</u>. 'hat really gets me.

Tom told me how he wasn't really happy growing up. Actually he was pretty damn miserable. I mean, you can see how lousy it would be with the folks hating each other and all. But that wasn't the worst of it. When he explained this bit about what Mom put him through--wow. I don't know if I can believe it now. I mean that kind of thing only happens in abnormal psychology textbooks--not your own family. People write tragic plays about it...

I guess I'll never feel the same about my mother again. I suppose it's not her fault or something, but how she manages to make almost everybody miserable--it's unbelievable.

The only accidental part about my brother's jumping in front of a subway train was that he didn't die.

I mean, that really makes me cry.

Mother

....When I have nightmares about her (I used to a lot, right after I left), I'd wake up with this empty angry feeling of hate. 'hat's a wild thing, you know? Think about how it is to hate--to run from the only person who ever really took care of you through everything.

She resented me for existing--at least that's how I felt. 'hat's how it was. She told me so. If it weren't for me, she'd be happy. So I left. And now <u>I'm</u> happy.

The anger that I feel--that doesn't bother me. I know it's justified. What gets to me is this feeling of--well, like last night: I woke up in the middle of sleep and cried and cried and missed her and wanted her to lean on and to like me. I was miserable. I missed her. My roommate can't understand it; neither can I. 'his feeling of love-hate rips me up. I'm on her hook. I know it.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Reuben Brower's "The Speaking Voice," repr inted in The Study of Literature, Sylvan Barnet, Morton Berman, William Burto, eds. (Boston, 1960), p. 160.

2. Lev Semenovich Vygotsky's Thought and Language, p. 150.

3. Peter Elbow's "A Method for Teaching Writing," Writing: Voice and Thought, NCTE, 1968, p. 8.

CAN HER PRAYERS BE ANSWERED?

by Jenny Patchen

Dim light broke through the stained glass windows, that were situated on either side of the richly decorated church altar. A nun, solemn in a black habit, approached the altar and began to light the vigil candles. The flickering lights revealed her aged face, wrinkled with years of loyalty and devotion. God has been good to her; He has given her life, provided her with food, clothing, and rarely had he stricken her with disease. She kneels, gives the sign of the cross and begins to pray. "Oh, Divine Creator, give to me the strength that I may. . ."

Can her prayer be answered by God? Facts and figures can not prove there is a God, nor can they prove there isn't one. The question "Is there a God?" shall always remain a mystery, but from my personal observations, I have come to the conclusion that God is non-existant.

First of all, no man has ever seen God. I suspect God was made up as a "crutch" to explain the mysteries of life. Before Christ, man had no idea where the rain came from or why people had to die. God, came into existence. God was divine and mysterious. God, as the divine mystery, explained the unexplainable.

To me, all the terrible events that take place in this world are unexplainable, if there is a God. I wonder where God was when millions of Jews, who believed in him, were being exterminated by an insane man. Where was God when the A-bomb dropped on Nagasaki and Hiroshima? I don't understand why so many people are dying of cancer? Why do thousands of people have to feel the gnawing at their stomachs, caused by starvation?

People should stop waiting around for God to help them. They should start believing in people helping people. Mankind has waited long enough for God to stop the bloody wars and senseless dying. In my opinion, man had better start relying on himself, instead of God, or the wickedness of Earth will never stop.

ARE THE REFUGEES GETTING REFUGE?

by Karen Hull

She said they deserved it. She said the Palestinians deserved the small, crowded, and filthy refugee camp. She was a Lebanese tour guide who felt very bitter toward them. "All that their life is for is to plot against us. Their only goal in life is to destroy our government, our country, and our way of life. How could we even consider giving them jobs? They would upset our entire economy. THEY ARE GUERRILLAS! It's no longer their secret plot, everyone knows!"

The hate in her voice was intense. "They'd fiendishly strike destroying blows on our country, similar to the way a pyromaniac would start a roaring fire. I can see them now, laughing with delight at the destruction! You are naive enough to give them a chance?!? You would literally be giving them a fighting chance!"

"Oh come on lady! Open your eyes! Just look around! The view speaks for itself. High-rise buildings are in the background of the gruesome scene. Twenty-four year old, one room, cardboard shacks are what the Palestinians must call "home". Here, in Beirut, are hundreds of people; victims of man's hatred and distrust toward man.

You talk about them ruining your people's lives? Look what your people have done to them! They are forbidden to leave the camp or get jobs. Jobs aren't even offered to them. Some are born there, some die there. Some have the great misfortune of living every second of their lives in the filth.

Imagine yourself, not as a tour guide making a living, but as a refugee. Living not more than one block away from very nice, comfortable houses, and you're without a job, without plumbing, without medical care, and without electricity. Imagine being born into a disease infested area with no future ahead of you.

They aren't given a chance to prove themselves, because the people who can give them the chance loathed and distrusted them from the moment of their (the refugee's) birth.

A child was probably born there today, do you hate him? Why?

Suppose you were walking by the camp, and saw a refugee squirming in pain. Would you help him, or isn't a Palestinian worth helping?

I can only hope that you aren't a typical example of human beings; destroying your fellow man and feeling righteous about it."

THE STEPS

by Karen Moskowitz

We're sitting on the steps in front of Nan's house--the tall old house with cracked cement steps. Just sitting around and talking. Jerry and Nan are sitting beside me on the bottom steps. Russel, Jon and Nick are all above us. Nan is telling us the story about the time she got off at the wrong train station, thinking it was her own, and couldn't figure out where she was. Then Russel cracks a few of his motorcycle jokes. His motorcycle jokes always make Jon laugh. You could probably hear him a mile away. Nick doesn't seem too interested by all this so he pulls out his old harmonica he got at the pawn shop and starts to blow a tune. Nan and Jon seem to know the song and begin picking the words out and singing along. It's a nice song. I sit back and listen:

"I don't want to work away doing just what they all say:

Henry, would you look at those kids over there, singing some crazy song. Why, I know that girl, her mother is a good friend of mine. You'd think her daughter could help her some time. That woman works hours to keep the house in order. Those boys ought to go out and find jobs, like any respectable young man would do. Just look at them. . . .

"Work hard boy, and you'll find, . . .

making such a havoc; hanging around the streets. It's those kind of kids that grow up to be criminals.

some day you'll have a job like mine

job like mine."

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